

Transcript: Episode 16. Bryan Mesa of De La Mesa Farms: Starting from Scratch

Nicole Witham: (Music) Hey, everyone. Welcome to the Farm Walks podcast brought to you by Tilth Alliance and Washington State University Food Systems program. I'm your host, Nicole Witham, a.k.a farmer Nicole, and here we are coming to the end of season two. This season, we brought together a great crew of organic, sustainable and innovative farmers [00:00:30] and some fantastic food systems resource providers as well. After this, there is one remaining episode that will be for our Spanish speaking audience with Alvarez Organic Farm, so keep your ears open for that. As always, you can head on over to our website, farmwalks.org to keep in touch and stay in the know.

In this episode of the Farm Walks podcast, I'm talking with Bryan Mesa of De La Mesa Farms out [00:01:00] of Tacoma, Washington. I get to chat with him all about the big move he, his family, and farm made from Hawaii to Tacoma in the midst of the pandemic and dig a little deeper into some of the food safety factors he considered when setting up the farm on a new property. Later in the episode, we connect with Anita Adalja of Ashokra Farm, who is a farmer and trained USDA GAP auditor, and also works on food safety trainings for small [00:01:30] growers. Anita brings up important considerations for wash pack spaces and tips for making farms more food safe.

Bryan Mesa: Hi, everybody. This is Bryan Mesa from De La Mesa Farms. You can get a hold of us at delamesafarms.com or you can search us on the web at delamesafarms.com. You can give us a call [00:02:00] here at 805-602-7415. You can also find us on Instagram as well, @DeLaMesaFarms or #echolamano.

Nicole Witham: Okay. Well, thank you so much, Brian, from De La Mesa Farms for being with us here on the Farm Walks podcast.

Bryan Mesa: Yeah, no problem. Really happy to be here. First of all, thank you so much, Nicole, for inviting me out to speak today.

Nicole Witham: Yeah, I love it when we get to [00:02:30] talk with anyone who's just getting in there and going for it. This is your second year? First year? Second year?

Bryan Mesa: Yeah. First, we just finished our first year and we're prepping for our second season in the Pacific Northwest.

Nicole Witham: Brian, tell me a little bit more about yourself and how you just became interested in farming. Let's start there.

Bryan Mesa: Oh yes. So, we were in Hawaii. I grew [00:03:00] up in San Luis Obispo where produce is readily available at every farmers market you go to. At the farmers market in SLO, there's probably 35 farmers every Thursday. Going to the farmers markets in Hawaii, I noticed there was probably one or two farmers and I couldn't get fresh local, organic produce. I couldn't even get tomatillos or

peppers to make salsa. [00:03:30] So I saw this huge need and demand early-on when I had moved to Hawaii in 2016, and was kinda in this transitional period where I wasn't really happy working in an office anymore. I had been working outside previously, I grew up landscaping helping my dad with his landscaping company. So I was starting to come around to this idea that I no longer wanted [00:04:00] to work in an office place and started just growing in our backyard and seeing if we could potentially make a living off of this.

And yeah, I was really just inspired by doing salsa initially and quickly realized that you can't just make money selling salsa and I wanted to do it farm-to-table, so we started experimenting with microgreens. And then, once I felt confident with [00:04:30] microgreens, we got into a farmers market. I actually went back to school and joined a program through the University of Hawaii called Gold Farm Hawaii, and that just really propelled us and we just took off in farmers markets. We went from probably 800 square feet in the backyard to a quarter acre doing a hundred dollars a week at farmers markets, boosting it up to like \$1500, \$1600 a week in sales because we have this array of produce [00:05:00] now. That's how we got started in farmers markets and where I got inspired to start growing produce and service the community with produce.

Nicole Witham: Yeah. That's excellent. Then you, after four-ish years, started to look for a transition over to the Pacific Northwest, so tell us how you found your place in Tacoma.

Brian Mesa: Oh yeah, totally. It was actually a really tough decision for [00:05:30] us to make, because we had built up a reputation--

Nicole Witham: Yeah, to leave Hawaii? I would imagine!

Brian Mesa: Yeah, we were just a walk away from the beach, so that's one of the biggest things I do miss. Yeah, we had worked so hard just to build up a reputation and to be able to have a location to grow our produce. So when looking to the Pacific Northwest, it was kind of like on the back burner. [00:06:00] We had been awarded a land grant through Kamehameha schools. We had won the Mahi-ai matchup and were in the process of expanding our farming operation when COVID hit. We pretty much transitioned everything overnight. I had been listening on the radio that this was coming out of China for some time. Once I saw it hit here, I had the [00:06:30] feeling everything was going to shut down and we made that transition overnight and went to online sales, and then the state just had these really stringent lockdowns and we saw inflation hit pretty heavy there and the cost of all my materials I was getting in just skyrocketed.

It really pushed me to say, "Hey, we should go hunker down for the winter." I had previously lived in the Pacific Northwest area before moving to Hawaii, so I felt like I had [00:07:00] some sort of roots here. I still have friends here that I associate with, so I just felt more confident that we would be able to be successful here. When this opportunity became available, I knew we had to jump on it. Yeah, we just jumped on it and never looked back and sold all of our

equipment that we had. I just shipped over like some microgreen trays and the paper pot transplanter and our tilter [00:07:30] and packed all of our bags and packed our two kids and my pregnant wife and said, "Let's do this."

Nicole Witham: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bryan Mesa: Now, here we are a year later and in a couple farmers markets getting ready to expand again. I just feel like, since the beginning, we've been in this constant perpetual stage of expansion.

Nicole Witham: Yeah. Tell me a little bit about the land you're on in Tacoma and what you're growing there.

Bryan Mesa: Yeah. We bought a two-acre parcel and I started off [00:08:00] with a quarter acre, so 10,000 square feet. I had no idea what I was getting into. I didn't know what the market demand was. I didn't know what people were going to think about what we were doing. I thought the market was saturated. I thought there were a tremendous amount of farmers here already and I thought it would be extremely competitive, and that's why I started off small. Once we got into the markets and I was able to see how different I was from everybody else and it [00:08:30] just seemed to really resonate with people and people have come to really respect what we're doing and they really enjoy the quality of the produce that we're able to provide on this really small scale. It's now propelled us and we're doing ... I think this year I'm going to be doing like 35,000 square feet, so almost an acre in total of production.

Nicole Witham: You've mentioned that you had [00:09:00] a salsa passion, which I would imagine means peppers and tomatoes and some herbs and things and microgreens is there, what else are you interested in growing or that you're growing?

Bryan Mesa: Yeah, that whole passion for salsa and value-added product is still going on today. I do have a couple heirloom varieties of tomatillo that I've worked on over the course of the last four years for that [00:09:30] salsa. I'm also working on some dent corn to do value-added products with that as well. We're trying to introduce tortillas, so we're doing like a farm-to-table tortilla or tortillera company on our farm. We're actually in the process of writing some grants right now to convert one of our sheds into this co-op commercial kitchen space.

Because of that passion that I had in the beginning [00:10:00] for salsa and value-added product, I'm starting to realize that not only in Hawaii, but here, a lot of aspiring farmers and aspiring entrepreneurs are having those same kind of problems breaking out and getting started that I had. It's actually become now more of a passion of mine to help these people that are aspiring to start their new business or they have [00:10:30] a really good product, but they just don't have the business skills to launch their product. Or they just don't even know

that they have to go get a permit and have to sell out of a commercial kitchen. Just the sound of all of that can be super intimidating and daunting.

Nicole Witham: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bryan Mesa: We're now trying to create this space here on the farm where we can foster that and help mentor and just build confidence in people to where they can build their own product, but then also give them a space at a low cost [00:11:00] or at no cost that they can establish that and work past those barriers and get into a market or get into a grocery store.

Nicole Witham: Yeah.

Bryan Mesa: That's just some of the things that we're working on here in the back that you don't really see what's going on with all of the produce and stuff. Yeah, value-added producer is going to be a big one here probably for us next year once we fill up the whole space.

Nicole Witham: Awesome. That's excellent. That is [00:11:30] really the successful future for small and medium farmers is to get into that value-added market, is to take those raw materials that are so lovingly raised and find a way to get a higher price point by processing them in some way, so that's excellent to hear that that's exactly what you guys are trying to do or already doing, yeah.

Bryan Mesa: Then the other thing for us, in the very beginning it was that we're doing zero waste. We don't want to waste anything. [00:12:00] I'm going out in the field and I'm harvesting carrots and we're pulling off these carrot tops and then we're throwing them in the compost pile. We didn't have chickens at the time, but we're throwing in the compost pile and it's like ... not only am I seeing money go away, but how am I going to utilize this? How do we keep making revenues off of this? That's kind of what pushed us towards that in the beginning was like, "Oh, we can do a carrot top pesto." We didn't sell all of our bok choy, we're going to do a bok choy kimchi and we're going to add that as an additional item in our CSA.

Nicole Witham: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bryan Mesa: [00:12:30] It's been always like, how do we have an array of different products and do a bunch of different things to generate revenue and generate our success and keep our success going?

Nicole Witham: Yeah. It sounds like you brought a lot of different experiences and skills with you into your farming ventures. Do you want to just describe a little bit about your background? I know that [00:13:00] when reading your pre-interview notes, for instance, it sounded like you did some cooking alongside your Abuelita.

Bryan Mesa: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, very fond, fond memories of living in Mexico, not having running water and having to wash your clothes by hand and dry them by hand, and then coming in and getting eggs from the chickens that were outside and cooking my own eggs, and doing huevos rancheros [00:13:30] was one of her things, because she was just like tons of salsa, homemade tortillas, fresh egg in the morning. I'm like four years old and she has me cooking over this stove that we lit a fire in and then stuck our pan on it, we're still trying to keep the fire hot.

I'm trying to help her keep this fire going and we're cooking our eggs in the morning. It was just that kind of living in the beginning and then having the tortillas available to me and just doing everything by hand. [00:14:00] I've really come to appreciate now that I've gotten older and I'm an adult and I have my own children to try to keep some of those traditions alive. Then, with the whole tortilla passion and value-added producer is just, I feel like things have gotten so far away from how we used to do it, I'm trying to keep some of these traditions alive and do a lot of this by hand.

Nicole Witham: Those visceral moments around food, I think, for many of us is the reason why we continue to be passionate about food in somewhere or another. [00:14:30] Whether it's cooking with our grandparents when we were little or handling the raw ingredients and actually having an understanding of where they came from, that's really important.

Here you are, you're in Tacoma or just outside of Tacoma now, I imagine that was a tremendous transition to make, because it's not like you loaded up a U-Haul to drive down I-5. You were coming from an island! [00:15:00] Tell us a little bit about that not only transitioning yourself and your family in moving, but also then just kick starting a farm again.

Bryan Mesa: Yeah, it was extremely challenging moving everything and the logistics I found as being the hardest. It's just trying to sync up the entirety of my house getting here by the time we got to the house, so I think that was the biggest stressor for us. [00:15:30] But once we got here and got everything shipped off the island, it was such a relief to walk the property. We had never seen the property before we bought it.

Nicole Witham: Oh, wow!

Bryan Mesa: So it was just based on me calling my friends and doing a tremendous amount of research and feeling completely confident that this was the one. When we actually got here and finally got to walk the property, I immediately went to work and told myself, "Wait a minute! Just do more planning, do more planning [00:16:00] and take it easy this season. Start it off small, figure it out, do a really, really good plan. See what the market demand is, see what people want." I've run into these new mistakes in the very beginning where it's like, "I think people are going to want this and I think they're going to love this. I love growing this."

Nicole Witham: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bryan Mesa: The reality of it is people don't necessarily like that. I've learned that you got to go grow some stuff and see what sticks and then just do [00:16:30] a little bit more of that and maybe a little bit less of this, and then keep doing more of that and more of that of what's working, and do a little less of what's not working, but don't take what's not working away because you're still generating a little bit of revenue off of that. Keep that around and keep the things around that are generating you a little bit, but then keep adding on the stuff that is making you money.

Nicole Witham: Yeah. What are some of the things that you needed to do to get these [00:17:00] value-added items up and running again in Washington? When you arrived, was there infrastructure? Was there water, power, buildings? Tell us a little bit about what you were working with and how you got setting those things up.

Bryan Mesa: Yeah, totally. We started from scratch. It was long previous to being here. There was a barn that was from 1909, falling apart. There was an orchard, a plum orchard [00:17:30] that was overgrown and crowded. I bought a couple tarps, the 50 x 100 tarps, and we just tarped the field. Reached out to Pierce County and got the soil tested, and then just went from there and worked on getting the soils and focused on our small little quarter acre and we focused on getting the soil in the right condition, but doing that organically, and then implementing some regenerative practices as well [00:18:00] to try to keep the cost down.

We were down a tremendous amount of nitrogen, potassium and phosphorus, so in an effort to do that, I bought some chickens and we started free-ranging chickens out there. Then we started with a manure-based compost, cow manure, more specifically, something that was really high in microbial life. That's something that I learned at the Echo Farm Hawaii and at their research program through Dr. Radovic, who was a soil scientist. [00:18:30] I got a lot of good soil education from him that I try to always use his rules of thumbs.

Nicole Witham: That's good. I like to hear that because sometimes that's a missing part of the puzzle for folks.

Bryan Mesa: Yes.

Nicole Witham: Yeah. That's great.

Bryan Mesa: Yeah, totally. We're heavily focused on the soil conditions and I still try to focus on the right soil conditions, the right makeup and feeding microbes and [00:19:00] inoculating the soil with different types of mushroom mycelium, so that we can create a symbiotic relationship with the root systems and the plants that are receiving nutrients as well. Then, yeah, so after we focused on figuring out what kind of compost, who had good compost, where that compost was

coming from because I started from scratch. I had to find [00:19:30] all new vendors. I didn't know where to get my compost from. I didn't know where to get my amendments from.

I didn't know where to get my packaging for my microgreens or my salad bags and everything from, so that took a tremendous amount of time. I think the biggest stress from the whole thing was buying compost I had never used and not knowing if it was going to work until we had planted in it and then seeing how the plants reacted to the compost and being like, "Oh, I got to adjust this or I got to adjust that," in these first couple of plantings. [00:20:00] But because of my experience, it made those smaller adjustments happen much more quickly and I was able to stop any losses early on by just going back through and amending the soil much more properly.

Nicole Witham: I'd love to add in here too something that I'm hearing you did a lot of and that's that you observed what was going on, like you took a tremendous amount of time and energy to observe what was happening and that's always [00:20:30] a major element of starting off right, right in a farming endeavor.

Tell me a little more about the physical infrastructure. You mentioned a barn and things like that and your water source, because that is often also another big challenge in ... you want to grow stuff, great, you've got ground and you can grow it, but do you have water and then do you have a place to wash and rinse and pack and store those items? [00:21:00] Let's hear a little bit more about those things.

Bryan Mesa: Yeah. Originally, the barn that was there, I was going to try to convert into our wash station, because it was centralized. That's one of the big things that I've learned from moving from Hawaii is I need a centralized wash station. I need a centralized location where we can grab our produce from the field and then easily come back here and it's got to be within a couple hundred feet, because we're trying to eliminate time, we got a lot of stuff to get out of the field. [00:21:30] I learned really quickly that I was just going to have to tear down the barn and completely reassess the whole place and where I wanted to put my wash station. We tore down the barn and we replaced it with a greenhouse and we're now doing hydroponic aquaponics in that greenhouse. We decided to set up our wash station in my garage for the time being. Our garage is actually this in-between right now, while we work on our grants that we're writing to build this [00:22:00] community kitchen that we've talked about.

But with setting up everything this year and being able to start anew, I realized I made a lot of mistakes that first time around, so we were trying to fix that this time and make everything much more aesthetically pleasing, not visually aesthetic, but just as the way things flow. Where we come into the wash station, how we drop off the produce and then it goes to our greens area then they go to [00:22:30] our roots area and just trying to keep the greens and the roots completely separate, having two separate locations for that kind of stuff, and then taking it a step further and saying, "These are our loose roots area.

This is our bunching roots area. This is the bunching greens area. This is the salad greens area. This is our bunching greens area.” And really having a space for everybody I find makes that much more efficient.

If it's like, I would [00:23:00] say ... I think of it as like a conveyor belt, where you just check something in at one section and it goes down the belt and line and then it ends up into the CoolBot. We have our wash and then directly behind you can do a 180-degree turnaround and unload everything that just came out of that wash right onto a dry rack. Now, all of our dry racks have wheels on them, so they're mobile and we can push our dry rack over to our salad green spinner or [00:23:30] a bunch of fans that are coming down trying to dry our stuff off quickly. Then after that, on the other side of that, you can then do another complete 180 and then it's the packing area and you can just go ahead and grab your produce that you need and start putting it into the bins and then again, you turn around again and it's going right into the CoolBot. I've always tried to think of it as that way as like an assembly line and setting it up as that.

Nicole Witham: [00:24:00] I'm hearing that currently you're making this all happen in your garage. Is that right?

Bryan Mesa: Yeah. Yeah.

Nicole Witham: What kind ... is that two-car garage, one-car garage?

Bryan Mesa: Yeah. It's like ... it is huge, man. It's like an RV kind of garage.

Nicole Witham: Oh, it's one of those big garages. Oh good.

Bryan Mesa: Oh yeah.

Nicole Witham: Great, fantastic.

Bryan Mesa: A lot of space, a lot of space.

Nicole Witham: That's excellent, and then you have a walk-in cooler of some sort?

Bryan Mesa: Yeah.

Nicole Witham: Yeah.

Bryan Mesa: That was a difficult purchase for me. It was like \$10,000 and took them forever [00:24:30] to send.

Nicole Witham: Yeah, in the midst of pandemic supply chain situations and stuff?

Bryan Mesa: Oh my gosh! I think I ordered that thing three or four months in advance to this season starting and it still hadn't shipped. Fortunately, the really nice people,

Emily and Matt over at Franklin Pierce Farm School, let me sneak some veg in their cooler for those first few markets, so that was really awesome of them, so thank you guys.

Nicole Witham: Yes, [00:25:00] that's great.

Bryan Mesa: You saved our season.

Nicole Witham: Now you're working in a big garage zone. It sounds like you have a very organized system in how you bring things in and how they're washed and cooled and so on. What are some of the actual physical elements? You've described a drying rack, what do you use for washing and spinning and so on and so forth?

Bryan Mesa: Yeah, and this is expanding this [00:25:30] year as well.

Nicole Witham: Yeah, with that big fat value added producer grant that you're going to get, right? Yeah, we're going to just put that out in the universe.

Bryan Mesa: Yes. We're working on, so yes, one day we would like to have everything we have times 10, right?

Nicole Witham: Yeah.

Bryan Mesa: It's really basic and I try to keep the cost down and it's something that I learned in Hawaii. We go to Wilco and we get these big troughs, these big tubs. I just built, with some [00:26:00] wood... we just built some stands and we try to keep people spaced apart to give everybody enough working room. That trough is already filled with water and I'm sorry for some of the short people that come here and work, because we did make them tall people stuff. But yeah, it made it really easy so that I can just have my elbows there and I'm not leaning over trying to save my back. I just came off of a double-hernia repair.

Nicole Witham: Uh-oh. Yeah.

Bryan Mesa: That's one [00:26:30] of the other things, I'm trying to think about my body now as well when we're doing a lot of this stuff, so taller was better for me and having it height appropriate for me has been really, it's taken a load off of me.

Nicole Witham: Yeah.

Bryan Mesa: We have everything. I've hooked up all the water, we had to bring water from outside into the garage and we do that with a hose and then I hooked up like a whole PVC line of pipe inside the garage and it has all these valves and we can flood all of our bins up with water as needed. [00:27:00] Then we hooked up drainage systems to all of that stuff as well, so then it drains outside and drains into our gutter drain that goes off of our property.

Then we have a hand wash station as well. You're supposed to come in, you got to wash your hands. I can't stress that enough to the guys, "Hey, you got to spray everything out with this bleach, water bleach solution. You got to wash your hands before you get started, and then you can fill up the bin with water. When you get done using it, you got to bleach wash that again. If you're pulling out vegetables [00:27:30] from this clean tub of water, before you stick it onto your dry rack, go ahead and give it another little bleach water solution spray and just ensure there's no bacteria or anything that's going to be on our salad bins, right?"

Nicole Witham: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bryan Mesa: "Then go ahead and put that on this dry rack that's right next to you." It has wheels, so that we can just roll this, turn it around 180 degrees, tip it over into our salad spinner. We didn't trip this salad spinner. I [00:28:00] bought this one. This is the first time I've ever bought, spent money, on a salad green spinner. I haven't used it yet. I'll let you know how it works out. I'm excited but nervous at the same time. Yeah, we have this now fancy salad green spinner that does 20 pounds of salad greens in 10 minutes, dries them. That's been a huge issue for us. We're doing 500, 600 pounds of salad greens a week. For three people, that's a lot. [00:28:30] That's a lot of drying. Drying takes up the longest amount of time for us, so hopefully this season, this one will be a lot more efficient at drying. Then now, we've set up a ton of, after it comes out of the dryer, we have a ton of tables with a bunch of fans over it and effort to just speed up that whole process.

You need to get really, really dry greens before you put them into the cooler and we will bag line our bins before we put [00:29:00] the greens in. Then after we clean dry the greens, after we bag line it, we will put a paper towel at the bottom to try to absorb some of that excess moisture that can be there, and then we'll load up the greens, put another little layer of paper towel over it, close it with the bag inside the bin and then stick it into our CoolBot. With doing this, we have really, really nice, fresh, crisp greens. Once [00:29:30] we get to market, it looks like the day we pull them out of the field. That's been a huge learning curve for me, it's like the produce looks amazing out in the field, but then how do you take this beauty and take it to the market and then be able to hold all of that in this whole process and then sell it, right?

Nicole Witham: Yeah, absolutely.

Bryan Mesa: I feel, with this whole process, I have learned how to do that now.

Nicole Witham: Yeah, there's a lot of techniques out [00:30:00] there and the tricky thing, one of which you're describing really well here with greens, is to keep them looking fresh and happy and not wilted and sticking to the sides of the bag and getting goopy or anything. They can be really tricky from a food safety perspective when you get into those added steps of washing and bagging. So many times we've heard in the food system that [00:30:30] when there's a salmonella

outbreak, for instance, it can be oftentimes from bagged greens. People think it's from eggs or meat or milk or something, and often it's bagged greens. It sounds like you are taking a tremendous effort in your system to make sure that each and every part of that is clean to the regulatory standards, obviously, and also aims at having a really fresh [00:31:00] and beautiful and healthy and safe product for your people to engage with. That's excellent.

Bryan Mesa: Yeah. I think, to go with that comment about E. coli and stuff-

Nicole Witham: Yeah.

Bryan Mesa: I feel when we hear about that, you don't hear about that happening to small scale farmers.

Nicole Witham: No.

Bryan Mesa: You hear that with the big guys, right?

Nicole Witham: Yeah, yeah.

Bryan Mesa: You had asked a question about water and I feel like that's a direct relation with that E. coli outbreak that you see every now and then. We [00:31:30] use potable water here.

Nicole Witham: You have city--

Bryan Mesa: Yeah, we're on city water.

Nicole Witham: City water, yes.

Bryan Mesa: A lot of these bigger operations, they're using agricultural water and they're back in California, where it's super hot and their water is contaminated already with E. coli. But they're using overhead and they're not timing their overhead properly from the time of harvest and to when they're spraying their overhead. You need to wait at least a week before you start harvesting. [00:32:00] I think it's like 48 days or 48 hours is the minimum before you're supposed to harvest your greens. When you're at that kind of scale, man, it is really hard to have that kind of control over what's going on.

Nicole Witham: Yeah.

Bryan Mesa: That's why I'm always going to try to stay small. I don't want to get that big because I just feel there's too much room for error.

Nicole Witham: Yeah, yeah. Just that point you're bringing up between utilizing a well water source or some sort of an agricultural or [00:32:30] water district source for irrigation versus what you're using in your pack house. And, in some cases,

farms are using well water for washing and packing in their pack house, but they have to go through extra steps to be able to utilize that water, or they have to have it tested regularly and so on and so forth. Yeah, obviously, when we are trying to educate new and beginning farmers, these are some of the most important things for them to consider is, what type of water do they have access to and what are the [00:33:00] things they're wanting to grow? Because obviously, they have heavier needs for water and washing and irrigation than others.

Bryan Mesa: Yeah. Then, from a food safety standpoint, knowing those things where, "Hey, you know that your water can potentially be contaminated, you don't want to use overhead on your greens prior to harvesting, because you're contaminating your greens."

Nicole Witham: Yeah, yeah.

(Music) This episode is generously supported by the National Farmers Union Local [00:33:30] Food Safety Collaborative, a network of farm and agriculture organizations providing education and training for local food producers. Have you filled out an episode evaluation? Your feedback helps us adapt and update future programming and to communicate needs and impacts to our funders. There is a giveaway alert. There are prizes from Osborne Quality Seeds, Chelsea Green Publishing and the Green Horns. [00:34:00] Each evaluation submitted for season one or two counts as one entry in the giveaway for these prizes. We love that you are listening in, so be sure to give us your feedback. Evaluations can be found for each episode at farmwalks.org.

You mentioned, I should have asked this earlier, how many employees do you have interacting on the farm?

Bryan Mesa: Right now, 1, [00:34:30] 2, 3, we have 4 employees, all of which are part-time. We're starting to run an army of part-time employees, which is awesome. We really do need it. I'm hoping to create a full-time position and we are actually getting ready to hire. We just wrote up our little ad that we want to put out, so if there's anybody or people that are interested, please try to reach out to us. We're looking for part-time employees one or two days a week, seasonal [00:35:00] work as we go into our second season.

Nicole Witham: Yeah. As part of you're not only out in the fields and how you cultivate or weed or manage the crops in the field, then you're also having to train these folks to help you with this wash and pack process, so how does that go? Do you have a favorite way of training folks?

Bryan Mesa: I like to start everybody in the wash station. I like to start everyone off with clean pack [00:35:30] wash, and basically, I start everybody off with roots, because I feel like green takes a little bit more time and care and understanding about how to handle veg, because you can bruise salad greens really easily, and

it's a high dollar cash crop for us. Yeah, I start them all off there. I try to make everything really visually... I try to give a lot of visuals for people. When you come into our wash station and we go through a [00:36:00] training, it's like, "Hey, here's a handbook," and, "Hey, here's some pictures of me actually handling veg properly," and then I'm going to have this conversation about how we harvest roots or how we harvest greens. But then I'm going to give you a little pamphlet that goes with that with these visuals.

Then when you come into our wash station, after we've done this for a day and you've done your shadowing and stuff, you're now going to be able ... [00:36:30] you should be able to go into the wash station and I give you a couple things because we have all these visuals now up on our walls as well or in our roots area. "Look, you process beets this way, here's your cheat sheet for beets. You need X, Y, Z with rubber bands, we expect three to five roots that are about four to six inches in diameter." And it's the same with each crop that we have. Really, really having these stuff available, so that if they have questions, they don't need to come [00:37:00] to me or they don't need to ask their co-worker, "Hey, what do I do with radishes?" [crosstalk 00:37:07]

Nicole Witham: Look at you being so professional. You have a handbook? You have signage and pamphlets? Come on, Brian. That's awesome. Are you picking up my sarcasm? I'm being--

Bryan Mesa: Oh, no. Yeah, no. I get it. I get it. It's been a long time coming for that.

Nicole Witham: Yeah.

Bryan Mesa: We've been talking about this for years and to finally now to start everything fresh and new from the beginning [00:37:30] and set it up properly? It has been so easy to work itself and just focus on the marketing or focus on the crop plant. If the planting doesn't work, immediately switching that and really focusing on the numbers and what we're doing with the business, as opposed to worrying about how my people are clean washing and packing in the wash station.

Nicole Witham: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Excellent. It sounds like you have really gone through an incredible journey of transitioning [00:38:00] to Hawaii and then back from Hawaii and not only doing that with your family and moving your household, but you jumpstarted this whole new farm endeavor, and you've done it really thoughtfully. What's the next step on the journey for these amazing greens that you create? They get washed and packed and cared for and cooled, where are your products going?

Bryan Mesa: Yeah, it's [00:38:30] really exciting for us right now, actually. We just landed a contract with Auburn School District. We are going to be on their salad green bar. These kids are doing like 40 pounds of salad greens a day out of that school, so it's a really great start for us with a commercial account. We are expanding our operation just because we were selling out at the farmers markets. We

were doing Bellevue Crossroads Farmers Market and we were [00:39:00] doing a Kirkland market. We just weren't able to keep a full booth, we would sell out in about an hour and a half, so just trying to keep up with that demand and then expand into new marketplaces. We're looking to expand into a local market.

Hopefully, we get into the Proctor market here in Tacoma is what we're really going for, just so that we can now start to let the community know, "Hey, we're here." I got this foundation and I feel confident [00:39:30] in letting people know, "Hey, we're here. Let's start to bring business here." Then actually expanding out into the city as well. We do have one restaurant account out there that we just started and hopefully we can continue to grow our restaurant accounts and our wholesale accounts. I try to go slow on that this time just because it gets out of control really quick--

Nicole Witham: Yeah. It really has to be worth it because it often takes a lot of delivering. And if it's not enough, [00:40:00] then it's not enough.

Bryan Mesa: Yeah.

Nicole Witham: Yeah. Yeah. Well, that's excellent. I'm hearing that you have a really cool institutional farm-to-school thing going on, I love that. Two farmers markets, are you also doing a CSA?

Bryan Mesa: We are as well. We do about a 50-person CSA here that offers pastured eggs, pastured meat birds as well available during the winter season. Then we also offer some value-added farm products.

Nicole Witham: That's fantastic. [00:40:30] You have all these direct-to-consumer opportunities and markets, you have some wholesale things that you're playing with and at the beginning of the episode, you talked very passionately about some really cool value-added items and that sounds like that's coming up, that's coming down the pipe. What are some of the things that you really look forward to value-adding?

Bryan Mesa: Oh yeah. Well, and that's where the passion came from and where all of this got started with through the value-added product. What we have coming up is, hopefully, we're working on [00:41:00] this co-op kitchen space to where we can produce value-added products from our farm, such as salsas and tortillas, pickles, ferment, and yeah, like kimchi and stuff. Whatever else we can think of is like a zero waste on our farm to where we can just like utilize it to make more money off of.

Nicole Witham: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bryan Mesa: Yeah.

Nicole Witham: Well, cool, Brian. I'm rooting for you big time, buddy.

Bryan Mesa: [00:41:30] Thank you. Thanks. Appreciate it.

Nicole Witham: Really proud of the jump you made, that takes a lot of guts.

Bryan Mesa: Thank you.

Nicole Witham: Yeah, thank you for spending some time with us. The final couple of questions that we have for you-

Bryan Mesa: Okay.

Nicole Witham: ... are just going to be rapid fire. Try to answer in just a couple words or a couple of sentences tops.

Bryan Mesa: Totally.

Nicole Witham: Okay. What do you love about farming?

Bryan Mesa: Eating all the great produce that's readily available. I love my diet. I love the farm [00:42:00] diet.

Nicole Witham: Yeah. Isn't that why we are doing this, is to eat well? What do you not love?

Bryan Mesa: Sometimes the stigma that goes around farming. Just like you're supposed to farm a certain way, you're supposed to do things a certain way. That's the only thing that really bothers me. I don't have a tractor and I keep telling and people keep coming by like, "Where's your tractor? Aren't you supposed to have a tractor?" I'm like, "No, man. I do everything by hand. Didn't we do this like how many hundreds of years ago without a tractor?"

Nicole Witham: Mm-hmm ([00:42:30] affirmative). I love it. What is your favorite thing to do in the off season? Or if you have an off season?

Bryan Mesa: Yeah. I've been forced to have an off season moving here, which is a really good thing. Yeah, I found mushroom picking. That was super awesome. I've been going out and looking for some trails. I haven't found any morels yet because that's springtime, so hopefully this year I get out and I can find some morels.

Nicole Witham: Yeah, come on [00:43:00] up to the Olympic Peninsula.

Bryan Mesa: Oh yeah.

Nicole Witham: It's good mushrooming spots up here. This is one of my favorite questions. If you could pick a skill to just have magically instantly, what would it be?

Bryan Mesa: My wife laughed at me when I told her this, but I said, I want to learn code better, so that I can start mining [00:43:30] Bitcoin.

Nicole Witham: Exactly. I don't even know what that is. I know what it is, but--

Bryan Mesa: Yeah, right.

Nicole Witham: Not exactly. That's great. Well, thank you, Bryan, so much. Really, really appreciate you spending some time with us and describing your new farm venture here in the Pacific Northwest.

Bryan Mesa: Sweet. Yeah, I'm excited. Thank you guys so much for having me. I really appreciate the time.

Nicole Witham: (Music) Up next. I'm excited to connect with Anita Adalja of Ashokra Farm, who wears many farmery type hats, [00:44:00] one of which is being a trained USDA GAP auditor and a food safety trainer for small farmers.

Anita Adalja: My name is Anita Adalja, and I'm a farmer based in Albuquerque, New Mexico and I'm also a food safety trainer. You can follow my farm on Instagram at AshokraFarm, ASHOKRAFARM, and I encourage you to visit the Young Farmer's Coalition Food Safety resource page. There's a lot of really [00:44:30] amazing resources for small farmers that are practical and relevant to your operation. There's also a practical guide to food safety that breaks down that intense food safety language in a way that's accessible and helpful to everyone.

Nicole Witham: Thank you so much, Anita, for being here with us on the Farm Walks podcast. We're really glad to have you to add a little more information on our De La Mesa Farms episode.

Anita Adalja: Thank you so much for having me.

Nicole Witham: I'd love to just hear a little bit more [00:45:00] about you and what you're up to and how you made your way into this resource provider role.

Anita Adalja: Yeah, absolutely. I am a farmer, I'm based in Albuquerque, New Mexico for now. I've been farming for about ... I'm going into my 12th season now. Right now, I have my own operation, which is about a two-acre farm that I run with a few other folks. We're a clear people-of-color-led farm where [00:45:30] we grow a diversity of vegetables. The name of the farm is Ashokra because we primarily focus on a lot of okra and it's named after my father, whose name is Ashok. But we grow a whole ride range of vegetables on the farm and sell at the farmers market and restaurants and to aggregated CSAs as well.

I will say that, another work that I do in New Mexico is centered around food safety. As many small farmers know, we have to wear multiple hats [00:46:00] and hustle, so I do have training and food safety on multiple levels. In New Mexico, since 2016 I have helped to design a food safety training specifically for small farmers that don't fall under the produce rule of the Food Safety Modernization Act. They're not making ... they're making less than \$25,000 a

year. We designed a food safety training that is really hands-on, really practical, really relevant for small growers that is risk-based. This food safety training [00:46:30] is an alternative to the Produce Safety Alliance training.

A big part of the work that I do here in New Mexico is I go around, meet with farmers, do assessments of their farms, but then also hold these trainings around the state. In addition to that, I'm a trained USDA GAP auditor with a group GAP, so I work alongside a great group of farmers that really work on centering farmers as experts in their field and helping them get that GAP.

Nicole Witham: Awesome.

Anita Adalja: That GAP status, if that's [00:47:00] helpful for them. Yeah. I do consulting work with the National Young Farmers Coalition around, again, food centering farmers as food safety experts in the field.

Nicole Witham: Excellent. Well, we're so glad to have you and all of your multi-faceted viewpoints here. When we talked to Bryan, it was really amazing that he had taken what sounded like a pretty thriving, small farm business from Hawaii and moved on [00:47:30] over here to the Pacific Northwest in the Tacoma area. When he did, he was really starting from scratch on a new piece of property. We talked a lot about how he then had the choice to set up his different zones on his farm. It would be really great to hear, with your experience, what are some of the most important food safety factors to consider when designing and deciding where things go on a [00:48:00] farm?

Anita Adalja: Yeah, absolutely. It sounds like a pretty remarkable move that he made and also a great opportunity too to design a farm based on that experience, especially when it comes to wash pack areas on a farm. One of the most important considerations is thinking about the flow. I would say flow on a farm, not just in wash pack, is really important. Where you go, and when I say flow, I mean when you're harvesting, what is the path, literal [00:48:30] path that you take from taking your harvested goods to an area where you're processing them, packing them, getting to the end consumer.

In terms of a wash pack station, thinking about how that flow works. The dirtiest produce, literal dirt, like carrots with dirt still on them, where are they entering the wash pack air area versus where are they exiting and making sure that each step into that wash pack is one more process of being cleaner and one more step away from the dirtiest [00:49:00] produce. The end result being that produce coming in is not coming in contact with produce going out and the produce going out, there's no ... there's always risk, we can't eliminate that risk, but there's a less chance of it coming in contact with that produce that has just been harvested. However you lay out that, I've seen really amazing wash pack stations that are L-shaped or just a straight shape or are snaking through a barn, whatever area that you have set aside, but just ensuring [00:49:30] that you're taking that one step. Each step is kind of a cleaner process.

Nicole Witham: Yeah. A lot of farms or farmers don't always have the ability to start from scratch, so if you do, you're starting from the beginning. It's a fantastic opportunity to really, really look at your layout of everything, from where your row crops will be to where they're entering and leaving, that's fantastic. What are some of the things that people should avoid?

Anita Adalja: [00:50:00] I would say, one of the biggest or an important factor is cleanliness. Cleanliness and organization helps goes hand-in-hand with food safety. If you can't see ... in your wash pack station, you can't see an area, it's difficult to reach, you can't move things, that's going to be challenging to clean. It's going to be challenging to see if there's any kind of rodents or any kind of issues coming in there, contamination. I [00:50:30] would say avoiding, having more space than you think you'll need is always really important. No one's ever complained about having more space and ability to navigate. I would say avoiding pressing up like your sinks or storage containers up against the wall, so you can't kind of investigate or check behind. I've worked with great farmers who have incorporated wheels, so putting wheels on your sinks, putting wheels on your storage container, so that you can wheel them away, you can clean behind them. Just [00:51:00] making sure that your wash pack area has areas for investigation to check things out and then inspection and then to be able to clean.

Nicole Witham: Yeah, so really paying attention to what your surfaces are, how you can have a modular system that you can roll things out and around, you can scrub and wash and rinse behind things, always super duper helpful. Yeah. Bryan is starting from scratch. He came up with a really amazing situation where he's actually using [00:51:30] his, I think, it's like a big garage that he has taken and transformed into his whole farming wash pack and cooling zone. I would imagine that then there are other things that are happening in that space as well. Space is usually limited. What types of things can or cannot occur or should or should not occur in this same space? Yeah, how would you separate those [00:52:00] things or note those things?

Anita Adalja: Sure, absolutely. I think a lot of farmers have this challenge of, space is limited on farms. Maybe if you're first starting out or you don't have the funds or resources to expand and have a designated wash pack area, and that ... through the lens of food safety, that's perfectly fine and that's realistic and that's what's happening to a lot of us. Important things to keep in mind here are number one, separation of duties. It's totally okay to be storing [00:52:30] your backpack sprayer or chemicals that you're using for other parts of your farm or fertilizers even, but just making sure that they are, if you can have them stored away, so that they're not coming into contact with your wash pack or a farthest area of the wash pack as possible, thinking about what's going to happen if they spill, is there a way to contain that? Is there a way to make sure that it's not going to be coming into contact where you're cleaning and sanitizing or washing produce?

Also, when you [00:53:00] are using the wash pack or making sure that workers or other folks aren't using the other chemicals, so that your other materials that

you're storing in there, just to make sure that there's a least amount of chance possible that there could be cross contamination. Just really emphasizing that separation of duty when you have other things stored in that area. The other thing I'll say that's really important with wash packs, we all have our friendly farm dog, friendly farm cat, making sure [00:53:30] as much as you can, that they're not entering that area. This is where your post-harvest production or post-harvest packing and washing is happening and that's the closest it's going to get to the end consumer, so that's the most important part of making sure that there isn't any contamination. Your cat might be great for helping with rodents, controlling rodents outside of the wash pack, make sure that they're not entering that wash pack and potentially contaminating the produce there.

While I'm on the subject of rodents, [00:54:00] pest control is really important in your wash pack. Whether you're doing it yourself or you're hiring someone else to do pest control, it's so important that if you're using those baited or if you're using traps that you don't bait them. I know this might sound counterintuitive, but baiting the trap actually can encourage more of your little mouse friends to enter. If you are using those traps, don't bait them. I used to work on a farm, actually, I had a great technique. They would put the traps [00:54:30] unbaited in a brown paper bag, so if the mice entered and got trapped in there or got killed, if there's splatter, and I know this is a gross thing to think about but it happens. When a mouse, if it splatters, it's not going to contaminate the rest. It's going to be contained in this bag and you don't have to see it and you can just dispose of the bag. That's an idea too.

Nicole Witham: Yes. This is the first time we've talked about rodents splattered on the podcast, but it's definitely--

Anita Adalja: [00:55:00] It's real.

Nicole Witham: It's real, it's a thing for sure. Another thing that comes to mind when talking about different things that enter and leave or different things that could become contaminated in the process is also the bins or compartments or things that are used to store or gather the produce and/or that you're using to distribute a CSA, for instance. Do you have any certain things that you really like using or really don't like using? How do you treat those?

Anita Adalja: Yeah, [00:55:30] absolutely. I love reusable bins and totes. One of my favorites is, I think you can purchase it at Home Depot or at Lowe's, and it's a black plastic tote with a yellow lid, and it's really wonderful for storing produce in your walk-in, it's not going to allow the green to wilt or anything like that to happen. There's so many you can choose from and oftentimes farmers are just using what they have available, what's free maybe. I've worked with farms that have gotten free [00:56:00] black plastic crates from restaurants that are finished using them. But what's most important with whatever you're using is that you have a cleaning and sanitizing schedule and you're able to store those bins or store those crates in an area that they're not going to be contaminated. Whether that's in your wash pack area, whether that's under a tarp stacked on a

pallet and that you have a process for yourself or your workers where you're inspecting those bins and making sure that they are clean and sanitized before you're doing any harvesting, any packing in [00:56:30] them.

Yeah, I definitely encourage reusable bins, they're much better than plastic bags, but it's just important to maintain. Make sure that they're clean and have a schedule. I would add one other thing. With wash pack, of course, puddling is a big issue. Making sure that there's good drainage, if you need to put gravel in, if you need to install a French drain system, ensuring that you're not going to have puddling there that could be a source of contamination, splashing [00:57:00] that could get on the clean produce. There is bacteria and there are contaminants that can live in water that could get on your produce and be a food safety hazard too, so just ensuring that you have proper flow and proper drainage.

Nicole Witham: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. In our interview with Bryan, he also mentioned that he's scaled to the point now where he is bringing on employees, and it sounded like he had a pretty fantastic [00:57:30] mode of training those employees. Go, Bryan. He has a handbook and he has printed materials that he posts within his wash pack station to note what the procedures are. What are some things to emphasize on these types of training guides or the materials that farmers create for their employees? Do you have any tips or tricks?

Anita Adalja: Yeah. That's great that he's made these SOPs or these guides for his workers. I think [00:58:00] being able to inform your workers or train your workers from the very beginning is only going to help in efficiency, productivity, and just better crew morale, for sure, getting through this kind of work. I would say some of the most important pieces to include are, kind of, I've seen SOPs that have visuals, so understanding what kind of mode of education or training works the best with your crew, so really understanding what kind of language or making [00:58:30] sure that's accessible and understandable. I've seen farms that work with youth or even adult participants too, really engaging with SOPs, standard operating procedures that have visuals. What does it actually look like when a bin is clean? What is ... put a photo of the sanitizer you use?

Another example is, if you're using something like Sanidate 5.0, the sanitizer, putting a visual marker on whatever the measuring cap is or [00:59:00] container that you use, so that folks can look at that and see that. Having great visuals, great signage is really important reminders. If you give someone a training material or a training booklet, they might read it, but then not have it with them when they're doing the actual process, so having signage posted around that folks can see is also really, really helpful.

Nicole Witham: I love that. As a visual kinetic learner, I love that, for sure. I think definitely being aware [00:59:30] that sitting down and chronologically writing out or outlining with bullet points, having things in a written mode is great. But like you're saying, then take the next step, go through that, take pictures, find a way to get

it printed and laminated. Laminating would be great in a wash pack area I would imagine.

Anita Adalja: Absolutely. Yeah.

Nicole Witham: Yeah.

Anita Adalja: There's also really great ways of getting your staff, [01:00:00] your hired staff, your crew, your family or friends, volunteers in on that too. Have them help you write these SOPs, help them, or have them help you write these training guides so that they can feel like they're part of the process, they're seeing things that maybe you're not seeing. I've worked with farmers who actually go through the steps of what they're doing and record it as they're doing it and then listen to that recording and write the training guide from that, which can be really helpful too.

Nicole Witham: Very cool. Well, [01:00:30] thank you so much, Anita, for all of your tips and easy to digest information, we really appreciate it and so do our new and beginning farmers.

Anita Adalja: Thank you.

Nicole Witham: (Music) Transcripts, show notes, today's evaluation form, and more information about upcoming happenings can be found at farmwalks.org. If you enjoy this episode, you can [01:01:00] rate, review and subscribe on Spotify, Apple podcast, farmwalks.org or wherever you access your favorite podcast. Thank you to all of our listeners for coming back for season 2 and continuing to submit awesome questions and requests through the Ask A Farmer form. It really helps bring our conversations to life. A shout out to our Farm Walks podcast production team, behind the scenes, logistics and general wrangling by Teri Rakusin. [01:01:30] Theme music by Abacus. Farm Walks website, logo and pod art by Riled Up Goats. Last but not least, our audio engineer, Aaron Mason, who is really good at making us sound great. I'm your Farm Walks podcast host Nicole Witham, thank you everyone for listening. It has really been a pleasure. (Music)